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Verstehen and Pragmatism

Essays in Interpretative Sociology

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Phenomenological "Verstehen" and Interactionist "Understanding": Similarities and Differences[1]

Jef C. Verhoeven

More than a decade ago, on 25 June 1980, I had the opportunity to interview Herbert Blumer. One of the issues that arose was phenomenology. To his recollection, Blumer had only a few contacts with Alfred Schütz by letter, but he had never discussed Schütz's work with him. Nevertheless, he was familiar with the phenomenological position, particularly that of Edmund Husserl, and he offered his opinion on it in this interview. Because Husserl had a strong influence on Schütz, it seems appropriate to begin here by citing this interview[2] (Verhoeven, 1980: 1-3; Verhoeven et al., 1987: 18-21).

Blumer:

> What I want to state is that the similarity between symbolic interactionism, as I see it, and phenomenology, is represented by Husserl's position. It is constituted by the fact that both of these perspectives do recognize that the human being does stand over against - that's the important point here - does stand over against what he comes to designate as an object. In other words, there is a realization by both of these perspectives that one has to recognize this kind of separation, between the human being himself and what, so to speak, using Husserl's notion here, what enters into the stream of consciousness of the individual. That similarity does, of course, lead to a number of consequences that tend to merge these two points of view together to some extent. However, having identified in this very crude way what I refer to as the similarity between these two approaches, what I wish immediately to point out is that the way in which they concede this relation between the human being and, let us say, the item that appears in this stream of consciousness, which he notes, that difference is profound. Because Husserl confirms what is in some sense the long established tradition of separation between the psyche and matter in European thought particularly, Husserl is disposed to treat this phenomena of the individual standing over against his object, by regarding, by putting in, so to speak, a realm of its own. A realm of subjectivity which he felt had to be studied and analyzed and reduced through ... very intense, say what you will, an introspective type of approach (...).
>
> That's all there is to it. Accordingly, adopting that position he was inclined to treat this phenomenon of subjectivity as being self-contained in its own right. It is just there as part of the natural make-up of the human being with, indeed, some extension back into the lower ranks so to speak of the whole animal kingdom (...).
>
> But the fundamental point is that this subjectivity - it's my word that I'm using here - this identification, so to speak , of what was represented by the posture of the individual over and against what he may note in the stream of his consciousness. That subjectivity is so conceived, that Husserl never saw, never saw in the way that it is perceived by symbolic interactionism and by Mead. For Mead this subjectivity exists in the form of a social process which is taking place by an individual making indications to himself. It's a social process there that contains the heart of

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1 The author thanks M. Ruebens for his critical remarks.

2 The author interviewed Herbert Blumer on 25 June 1980 in Berkeley, California. This interview was part of a larger project about the development of symbolic interactionism since 1945. It was made possible by the financial support of the American Council of Learned Societies to the author as American Studies Fellow and the Belgian National Foundation for Scientific Research.

what Husserl and his followers are concerned with. Now to bring this down to its really simple and crucial foundation. I put the matter this way. In symbolic interactionism consciousness has to be conceived of in terms of consciousness of something. There is no such thing as consciousness as such. It's consciousness of something. And as soon as one speaks about consciousness of something it immediately becomes clear that consciousness is a process of making indications. You're conscious of the light there, you're conscious of the daytime outside, or conscious that this is a chair, and so forth. They all represent instances of where the individual is conscious of these things, is pointing it out to himself. He is making an indication to himself of the thing which he is conscious of. The very essence of consciousness is not the way, obviously, of Husserl (...).

Verhoeven:

Would you say that Husserl was too solipsistic?

Blumer:

Well I would say, in my judgement, that the position of phenomenology logically leads to solipsism because where is consciousness? It's inside the individual. There is a psychic matter of its own that's entangled with the physical, and indeed the whole position of Husserl, was to disentangle it. To get it out there by itself, and analyze it, and what not. But it was there, as part of the psychological make up of the individual (...).
The point that I am trying to make is I think crucial and simple, whereas Husserl, in line with what has been traditional European thought, thought of the psychical as a realm of its own that existed alongside of the realm of the physical. Albeit that the two things got tangled together. His feeling was that the task which he was confronted with was to disengage this psychical realm completely, as far as it could be done, and then analyze it. Analyzing it along the lines suggested by Brentano, of course, Brentanos whole concept of intentions. This has represented the problem as seen by Husserl, and also by implication indicated the way in which Husserl saw the whole world, saw the universe! So that the effort which he undertook here to analyze the nature of the psychic after disentangling it was merely a matter of bracketing. Through disentangling it and what he wanted to reduce it to it's fundamental characteristics and those fundamental characteristics were indigenous to the very matter of subjectivity (...)
Husserl was led to believe that - make-up is a better term - the make-up of the subjectivity consisted of a priori forms. They were just there! It's in the nature of this kind of a posture of someone who is conscious of something. And the scholarly task of phenomenology became that of unearthing, if I can use that expression, these a priori forms which fit the psychic life just as the natural scientist was endeavouring to unearth the a priori forms inside of which the detection and observation of physical things could be fit. To give them sense and character and so forth. It's that sort of thing to which the detection and observation of physical things could be fit. To give them sense and character and so forth. It's that sort of scheme which I find in Husserl's approach.
To come back to the point I had in mind, speaking a moment ago, this kind of perspective or approach, this picture of the subjectivity or this picture of consciousness is one which puts phenomenology in a very fundamental way apart from the perspective of symbolic interactionism. Because consciousness, psyche, is not conceived of as something which is indigenous to the psychic world which is there lined up alongside the physical world. For Mead - I refer to him here - consciousness in the last analysis was an ongoing, actual, social process in which the individual was led to engage in discourse with himself, just as he might engage in discourse with someone else. He is making indications of things to himself. I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, I see a light up in the sky. I want this. I want that. These are all indications that the person is making to himself. These are the things of which he is conscious in other words. Well, that area consequently is composed of an ongoing kind of action, social action in which the individual makes indications to himself about different things. You've got a world there, so to speak, an empirical world to study, which is very, very different from what Husserl is outlining.

H. Blumer, albeit accepting some similarities, did see clear differences between "symbolic interactionism" and "phenomenology". His main criticisms concerned the introspection of phenomenology and consequently the solipsism of this approach. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity in this interview to go into this problem more thoroughly. I want to resume this discussion here. As far as I have been able to determine, the topic has not yet been treated in detail elsewhere. There has been some interest in comparative work on the ideas of Alfred Schütz and G. H.. Mead (Malhotra-Hammond, 1977; Perinbanayagam, 1975, 1985; Parsons 1978; Hardin, et al., 1986), on Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, and Herbert Blumer (Morrione, 1985), on G. H.. Mead and Martin Heidegger (Malhotra, 1987), on Simmel's and Weber's *Verstehen* and G. H.. Mead (Helle, 1985), but not very much attention has been paid to Blumer's position in relation to Schütz. In this chapter I propose to deal with two questions:

1) What are the differences and similarities between "Verstehen" (Schütz) and "understanding" (Blumer) of everyday life?

2) What are the differences and similarities between "Verstehen" (Schütz) and "understanding" (Blumer) in social research?

1. "Verstehen" or "Understanding" in Everyday Life

Schütz and Blumer use different starting points to describe understanding, the former relies on phenomenology, the latter on Mead's social behavioural description and pragmatism. For Schütz (1976), the main subject matter is the act, for Blumer (1969; Morrione & Faberman, 1981b: 287), it is the self-indicating individual. Both see the capacity of the individual to interpret and understand his/her own behaviour and that of their fellow-men as a necessary condition for human behaviour. Actors are producers of meaning and understand the meaning of objects and social behaviour. The problem is how the actor is able to interpret and understand social reality. I will describe how both scholars see the process of understanding going on in society: first, Schütz's standpoint and then Blumer's. Finally, I will compare them.

a) "Verstehen" and the Intentionally Inclined Actor

Because the everyday life-world is an intersubjective reality and because the individual is intentionally inclined toward that world, the actor, according to Schütz, must interpret the meaning or understand his own behaviour, the behaviour of his fellowmen, and objects. Schütz (1976: 84) describes this as follows:

> We shall call the process of ordering lived experience under schemes by means of synthetic recognition 'the interpretation of the lived experience' and we shall include under this term the connection of a sign with that which it signifies. Interpretation, then, is the referral of the unknown to the known, of that which is apprehended in the glance of attention to the schemes of experience.

Understanding is correlative with meaning. To understand means that we have to grasp the meaning of behaviour, which is partly given to the actor within the meaning-configuration and partly a creation by the actor. To understand somebody else, the actor first has to understand himself. My action is the starting point for understanding my fellow man.

The everyday life-world is pre-given for the actor, who is intentionally inclined toward that world. This life-world is an intersubjective, organized world, which can be understood by the meaning-configuration given by parents, brothers, sisters, and other people and by the actor himself. I have knowledge-at-hand of this world that guides me. This world is not only a given; it is also a task. I act upon the world. Knowledge-at-hand is immediately given to me as typified knowledge.

The way an actor experiences his acting is different. According to Schütz, the experience of the act (actum) and the action is not the same, although both are meaningful to the actor. The action is experienced *modo presenti*, while the act is experienced *modo praeterito* (Schütz, 1976: 57-63). Action is "the execution of the projected act", so the meaning of an action is to be found in "its corresponding projected act". Action might be best experienced in the labour of the wide-awake actor. He communicates with the others and organizes the world in function of his aims.

Communication means that the actor acts within the world and the actor supposes that the other is interpreting the signs the actor is displaying. Understanding the other is only possible if I meet the other in a face-to-face relation: we have to approach each other as fellow-men. Only in the "Umwelt" can I understand the other. If I meet the other in the "Mitwelt", I can understand the other only by using typifications. Even within the "Umwelt", we only can reach the other as a partial self. This is the same for myself. I see myself only as a me *modo praeterito*.

Within a communication pattern, I meet the other only as a type. There arises then the question of how to find the base of these types. To do this, we have to reconsider the act and the action of the self. I anticipate my action: it is a project. The act is accomplished conduct. By phantasy, I imagine future acts, not future action. This has two consequences. First, my projects are only based on the available knowledge-at-hand at the moment of the formulation of the projects. Second, it has consequences for motivation. Two kinds of motivation play a role in the action: because-motives and in-order-to-motives. In-order-to-motives are directed to the future; they determine the aim which has to be accomplished by the action. Because-motives are the incentives of the act in the past. My action is determined by in-order-to-motives. From the standpoint of the other, my action is determined by because-motives (Schütz, 1976: 86-96).

All social interaction is determined by these facts, i.e., the understanding of the other, the experienced courses-of-action, and the typifications. Social interaction is only possible if we accept the principle of reciprocity of motives. This means that my

in-order-to-motives may be considered the because-motives of the other and vice versa (Schütz, 1967: 23).

Consequently, meeting the other does not mean that I understand the other perfectly. I only understand the subjective meaning of myself and the objective meaning of the other (Schütz, 1976: 134). The biographical position of both is different and hinders perfect understanding. The ability to understand my own behaviour not only differs from the other's, but also depends on the position of the other in the social interaction. Is the other a partner in my action or is he an observer? As a partner, the other takes part in the interaction but not if he is an observer. The problem in both the partner and the observer is that the other cannot participate within my action, which is my project and, as such, is not easily grasped by the other. The other has only a chance of grasping the meaning of my project. To enlarge this possibility, the other can rely on his knowledge-at-hand of my motives. Only through the subjective interpretation of my action can the other approach an understanding of me. Further, if the other is not a participant in the social interaction, it is difficult for him to understand my action. The instruments he can use to reach this understanding are the typifications he has met before in similar patterns of interaction. These typifications allow him to grasp the meaning of the interaction. To the extent that these typifications are standardized and anonymous, the observer is in a better position to understand my action. As I will argue below, typifications offer the sociologist the opportunity to study social interaction.

The possibility of understanding my action depends not only on the person who tries to understand it but also on the characteristics of the action. Action might be emotional or rational. Rational action, although having a complicated structure, will be easier to understand than emotional action because of the standardized and anonymous types of action available (Schütz, 1964: 79-80). There is a similar problem for past and future conduct. Present action is more comprehensible than past or future action (Schütz, 1976: 273-293), which can only be understood through lived experience.

The understanding of social interaction relies on the typifications of lived experience of the actor, i.e., first order types. It starts from the personal experience of the actor, who is conscious of the difference of the act of the other. For that reason, Schütz (1976: 115) does not agree with the notion of empathy. What the actor attains is a stock of knowledge-at-hand of his own acts, and he imagines the acts of the other as developing the way his own acts develop. To understand these acts, the actor uses signs. Signs constitute a "meaning-context which is a configuration formed by interpretive schemes; the sign-user or the sign-interpreter places the sign within this context of meaning" (Schütz, 1976: 120). This sign might have an objective meaning, i.e., it can be intelligibly coordinated with what it designates within that system irrespective of who uses the sign or interprets it (Schütz, 1976: 123). It might also have a subjective meaning, i.e., the intended meaning of the sign-user. Signs are different from

indications, which are "objects or state of affairs whose existence indicates the existence of a certain other object or state of affairs" (Schütz, 1976: 118).

b) "Understanding" and the Self-Indicating Individual

By using the phenomenological method to analyze everyday life, Schütz suspends his doubts about the reality of the social world. As R. M. Zaner and H. Tristram Engelhart jr. (Schütz, 1974: XXII) put it: "The structures of the life-world become apprehended as the fabric of meaning taken for granted in the natural attitude ..." Schütz analyzes social reality as it appears in the consciousness of men, thus bracketing the problem of the reality of the social world. In the interview cited above, Blumer stressed the same characteristics of phenomenology when speaking of Husserl's phenomenological method. From his pragmatic standpoint, Blumer disagrees with this approach as being too much a description of a psychological phenomenon. Blumer also contends that, within the tradition of G. H. Mead, everyday life is known beginning from the fact that the actor is always conscious of something. As he said in the interview, consciousness is "an ongoing, actual, social process in which the individual was led to engage in discourse with himself, just as he might engage in discourse with someone else. He is making indications of things to himself". The ontological value of everyday life is not bracketed, but everyday life is considered to be out there. This is a fundamental difference from Blumer's approach (Blumer, 1969: 22) in which he takes a standpoint between realism and idealism. Blumer does not discuss what is going on in the psyche of the actor but rather speaks about acting individuals.

Notwithstanding this different ontological standpoint, Blumer describes a social world that is very similar to that of Schütz. The individual, like Schütz's actor, is an other-directed person. Blumer himself stresses the solipsism of phenomenology, because, in his opinion, phenomenology finds consciousness inside the individual. Consciousness may not be seen as a phenomenon that is merely inside the actor. The actor is always aware of his social environment; he is always conscious of something out there. Blumer sees a necessary consequence to be that the central point of interest is not the "action" as it was for Schütz, but the individual, making indications to himself and/or to the others. The social dimension of the actor is of the utmost importance. Indications made for myself and for the other acquire their meaning in the meeting of two or more actors and from the fact that both interpret the meaning in the same way. If an indication successfully influences behaviour in which the understanding of the indication made by myself is the same as for the other, then we may call the indication meaningful behaviour. This assumption about the acting individual is determined by the three premises that Blumer (1969: 2) sees as the leading principles of symbolic interactionism: first, people act toward things according to the meaning things have for them; second, this meaning is the result of the social interaction between two or more persons; and third, the meaning of things might be changed within the interaction by the actors.

The position that people act toward things according to their meaning implies for Blumer that we see the actor as an organism with a self. This is also the basic position of G. H. Mead. Having a self allows an individual to talk to himself, to make indications to himself. An individual becomes a self because he can act toward himself. The individual is reflexive: "He acts toward his world, interpreting what confronts him and organizing his action on the basis of the interpretation" (Blumer, 1969: 63). Interpretation is a substantial part of human action, for there can be no human action without interpretation. Of course, there is non-symbolic interaction, i.e., when a person reacts to the action of someone without interpreting the action (Blumer, 1969: 8). Although the last happens frequently, the most interesting part of human action is the symbolic interaction. Here the actor makes a gesture, an indication that has meaning not only for the actor but also for his fellow-men. Each actor is supposed to understand the meaning of this indication or definition. For Blumer, indication and definition are synonymous (Morrione & Faberman, 1981b: 291).

To understand the meaning of these indications, an actor has to develop a process of interpretation that consists of two steps: first, the self has to indicate the things toward which he is acting by performing an action, and second, this self elaborates meanings because it is communicating with itself. Consequently, interpretation is not merely a reaction toward a given meaning, it is a creative act as well (Blumer, 1969: 5). Although this picture of interpretation of meaning by the individual is similar to that of Schütz, there are differences. Schütz sees interpretation as an activity of the actor in his own consciousness, while Blumer stresses that interpretation is always linked to the outer world. Indications are made by the person, and these indications refer to the external world: a person makes a gesture indicating something outside. The person understands the meaning of objects and action as given to him by the interaction with others; it is not merely an action of consciousness. Although Blumer does not consider it easy for the person to interpret the meaning of the outside world, he does not agree with Schütz that a person only can understand his "Umwelt" properly.

Because the real meaning of objects and action is only given by social interaction, in Blumer's opinion the outside world is the way to the proper understanding of these objects and actions. Instead of the importance of the conscious actor, he stresses the importance of social interaction. For Schütz, obtaining a good understanding not only of the "Mitwelt" but also of the "Umwelt" is problematic: we have a clear picture only of our own actions as wide-awake actors and are hindered in understanding the action of our fellow-men. The conduct of our fellow-men we only understand as an act, and even an actor cannot grasp clearly the meaning of his "actions", only of his "acts". Blumer (1969: 17) takes the opposite stance:

> In most situations in which people act toward one another they have in advance a firm understanding of how to act and of how other people will act. They share common and pre-established meanings of what is expected in the action of the participants, and accordingly each participant is able to guide his own behaviour by such meanings.

This rather uncomplicated possibility of establishing contact with the other is the result of the fact that a person is "an acting organism". A person is not just consciousness, but also "an object of his own action. ... Like other objects, the self-object emerges from the process of social interaction in which other people are defining a person to himself" (Blumer, 1969: 12). If this is true, understanding personal action has to follow the exigencies of understanding objects. An object is anything a person can indicate, i.e., physical, social, or abstract objects. The meaning of objects depends on the meaning they have for the person. This meaning emerges within the interaction of individuals who are defining these objects; it is not intrinsic to the object. Social interaction is a necessary condition for the meaning of objects, and consequently for the meaning of the person. What is important here is that a person considers himself from the outside (and not from the inside as Schütz would have it). To understand himself, a person has to take the role of the other. By taking the role of the other, i.e., an individual, a group, a generalized other, we make objects of ourselves. We have to understand the meaning of objects within the world of people to grasp the meaning of objects.

This world is a social world populated by self-indicating persons. Because of this, human action has a special meaning. Human action is not just a reaction, but an action following an interpretation of the world involving self-indication. Human action always involves the definition and interpretation of something, and to understand it we have to get inside this interpretative process. This is the case for all kinds of human action - personal, social, or joint - because all social action is an interlinkage of the acts of acting individuals. Nevertheless, Blumer warns against the simplistic conclusion that most human actions are pre-given. All actions are new experiences that have to be created anew even when particular patterns of action seem to be repetitive. Even if some actions look repetitive, they cannot be realized without an interpretative process. Rules, norms, and structures are, indeed, always objects of new defining processes.

Before discussing the problems of understanding in scientific research, I want to make two remarks. First, it has to be stressed that Blumer and Schütz use the concept of action differently. For Blumer, action is any kind of human conduct, while Schütz only speaks about action as an ongoing process of a person with a project. Second, the basic assumptions about man and society of Schütz and Blumer are rather similar, although - as already noted - their conceptions of reality differ. Both stress the importance of the individual and the experience of society as pre-given to the individual. The individual, being an "actor" or a "self", is the kernel of all ongoing activity, although both recognize the existence of societies and groups (Verhoeven, 1985: 84). To say that Blumer ignores society would be a mistake that D. R. Maines (1988: 45) calls "one of the major myths regarding Blumer's work". Nonetheless, it has to be stressed that social structures, according to Blumer, have no life apart from the definition given by the self-indicating individuals. The way to society, organization, group,

and so on is through the individual. In his attempt to avoid reification of those collectivities, he stresses the paramount position of the individual.

In spite of these similarities between the basic assumptions of Blumer and Schütz about the individual and society, it has to be noted that both describe a different way of understanding the actors. Blumer relies on the outside world, while Schütz brackets this outside world. According to Schütz understanding is more like a process developing inside the consciousness of the actor.

2. "Verstehen" and "Understanding" in Social Research

Verstehen and *"understanding"* in daily life have connection with the methods of *Verstehen* and *"understanding"* in sociological research. The basic assumptions about how to understand the life-world are knowledge-leading principles for a scientific method for studying the social world. Taking into account the differences I described between Schütz and Blumer, we might expect that there are differences between them concerning sociological understanding.

a) "Verstehen" and Sociological Construction of Types

Because a sociologist wants to theorize about the social life-world, he occupies the same position as other researchers: his main objectives are observing and understanding social reality. He has no practical purpose. This means that a researcher will bracket some parts of his daily experience. First, he will bracket his subjective standpoint. As a researcher, he is only a partial self. He loses the direct connection with his total personality, which approaches social reality from his lived situation. A second bracketing will be applied to the orientation system, which means that he ignores the different zones - present, past, future - of social reality. Third, he brackets fundamental human fear and the relevancies that are produced by this fear. Although the researcher distances himself from this lived experience, he wants to study social reality from a theoretical system of relevancies. He determines himself what is relevant for his research in view of the problems he wants to solve.

This does not mean that the researcher is supposed to solve these problems totally independently from the others. Indeed, he has to do his work within a scientific tradition, and he has to be guided by the postulates of consistency and compatibility of all propositions, the postulate of the compatibility of these propositions with natural experience, the postulate of tested observation, and the postulate of clarity of concepts. Nevertheless, all these expectancies do not change the fact that "The theorizing self is solitary; it has no social environment: it stands outside social relationships" (Schütz, 1967: 253). In this description, we recognize the position of the observer of acts in everyday life. Consequently, the researcher will have characteristics and opportunities similar to those of the observer who wants to understand everyday life.

In spite of the similar position of researchers' vis-a-vis reality, Schütz stresses that there is a difference between the position of researchers who want to study phenomena of the natural sphere and the position of those who want to study phenomena of the social world. In the natural world, a researcher wants to find facts and regularities. Understanding these facts and regularities is not part of his task. Sociologists, however, "want to understand", they "want to and cannot understand 'social phenomena' otherwise than within the scheme of human motives, human means and ends, human planning, in short, within the categories of human action" (Schütz, 1975: 282; see also Schütz in Grathoff, 1978: 10).

How can a sociologist as a solitary self study the life world of human beings? It has been stated above that an actor can only experience the others adequately within a we-relationship. Because this is impossible for an observer and consequently also for a researcher, this problem has to be solved according to the same principles. For this reason, a researcher has to construct a model of the life-world that is populated with homunculi, typifications of acting people. How this is possible will be explained later. First, an answer should be given to the question of how is it possible for theorizing to be performed in intersubjectivity even when the researcher is a solitary self. Schütz takes for granted that theorizing happens "within a universe of discourse that is pregiven to the scientist as the outcome of other people's theorizing acts" (Schütz, 1967: 256). Researchers share theorizing with other researchers, who can communicate with each other. This is part of the daily lived experience. Both theorizing and daily experience can be communicated in the natural experience of daily life. This allows theorizing to develop in intersubjectivity.

How is scientific knowledge about society possible? Schütz takes as the starting point for the sociologist the typical characteristics of social reality, i.e., it

> has a specific meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, acting and thinking therein. ... The fact that in common-sense thinking we take for granted our actual or potential knowledge of the meaning of human actions and their products, is ... precisely what social scientists want to express if they speak of understanding or *Verstehen* as a technique of dealing with human affairs (Schütz, 1975: 272-73).

Verstehen is not introspection and is not a "private affair of the observer". Checking by others is possible. To accomplish this task, the sociologist has to apply the methods of understanding of the daily life-world. In this approach, the observer relies on constructs of the first order; the scientific researcher for his part relies on second-order constructs.

Because a sociologist has to understand social action as it appears in daily life, he has to refer to the context of the social action as it is lived by the actor. This brings him to the subjective interpretation of social reality. This social reality is intersubjective and the knowledge of this social world is socialized knowledge because we experience the possibility of the reciprocity of perspectives of the actor. This intersubjectivity is only attainable because we can typify the interchangeability of perspectives

and the congruence of the systems of relevance. This permits objective and anonymous knowledge.

To attain this knowledge, the sociologist has to analyze the total system of projects and motives, relevancies, and constructs of the daily life-world. It means that he has to rely on the postulate of subjective interpretation, which might bring him to subjectivism. To escape from this threat, the social researcher will construct types that do not refer to the action of unique actors but rather to a model of a part of the social world in which he is interested. This is no easy task because being a researcher the sociologist has no "here", he is not a fellow-man for the others like the actor he is studying.

A sociologist cannot attain immediate knowledge of the others, because they are part of his "Mitwelt", not of his "Umwelt". In relation to what the sociologist has experienced, he constructs types. These types are constructs made by the researcher. These types are models of behaviour of conscious persons. In these types, consciousness is limited to the elements relevant to the realization of the typical action pattern and to the problem of the sociologist. The motives and biography of the personality type are given by the sociologist. This is the creation of a homunculus together with the partners, standards, and institutions important for the definition of his behaviour. In this constructed world, rational acts, rational choices, and rational motives are possible within the given constructs.

Although a sociologist does not come to direct knowledge of the other, he is able to construct more reliable types if he can approach social reality in a we-relationship. This makes it easier for him to grasp the motives of the actors. A technique to attain this level of acquaintance with social reality is participant observation. Nevertheless, it may not be overlooked that the relevancy system of the participant observer is different from that of the fellow-man. Doing participant observation, the researcher drops his scientific relevancy system for a while to resume it when he is doing his analysis (Schütz, 1975: 277). The construction of ideal types for scientific work shows some similarities with the building of types of common-sense knowledge. The closer an ideal type is to a type constructed in a we-relationship, the less chance there is that it will fit with this future conduct and that the real conduct will correspond to the ideal type. Within a we-relationship, the person is more free and less anonymous. An observer works with a second order ideal type, which is a product of a they-relation, which is more anonymous and less free. It is the world of contemporaries in which we never meet real, living people. This last ideal type might be realized if it is causally adequate and meaning adequate. An ideal type is causally adequate "when it turns out to predict what actually happens, in accord with all the rules of frequency" (Schütz, 1976: 233); it does not always have to happen. It is meaning adequate if it is constructed so that the consciousness of the typified actor may live the typical behaviour equipped with the typical motives to realize the action. It is not sufficient for a researcher to find the typical motives, there should be an objective chance that the

motives really work. In-order-to motives only have a subjective chance, while because-motives have an objective chance for the actor. As an observer the researcher pays attention to these because-motives, which enlarge the possibility of meaning adequate and causally adequate interpretation.

Because the scientific constructs of the social world have to be the same as the common-sense constructs, the former should be guided not only by the postulate of subjective interpretation but also by the postulates of logical consistency and adequacy. The first of the three has already been discussed above. The postulate of adequacy implies that the scientific model of human action is constructed with concepts that make the act of the actor understandable to himself and his fellow-men. The postulate of logical consistency demands clear and distinct concepts and compatibility with formal logic. This ideal type construction must be guided not only by these postulates, but also by a more important one: the postulate of rationality. In sociology, we make rational models of social action. This postulate applies the other postulates, as is made clear in Schütz's (1976: 86) definition: "The ideal type of social action must be constructed in such a way that the actor in the living world would perform the typified act if he had a clear and distinct scientific knowledge of all the elements relevant to his choice and the constant tendency to choose the most appropriate means for the realization of the most appropriate end." This implies for Schütz that all behaviour has to be interpreted in terms of this model of rational action.

b) "Understanding" and the Meticulous Scrutiny of Social Reality

Blumer does not differ from Schütz about the objectives of a sociologist, but they have totally different opinions about the possibility of attaining insight into social reality and the methods needed to do so. The guiding principle of Blumer (1969: 28) is that scientific inquiry has to "respect the nature of the empirical world", and his starting point is "that the empirical world of our discipline is the natural social world of everyday experience" (Blumer, 1969: 148). Blumer's methodology follows his assumptions about social reality, for he rejects Schütz's idealism. He opposes the idea that reality only exists in the minds of people. What we know is what we can indicate outside the mind. If this is only an image in our minds, we end up in solipsism, which makes science impossible. However, he also opposes some aspects of realism, i.e., the propositions that reality is immutable and that social reality has to be studied like the object of a physical science (Blumer, 1969: 22-23). Blumer considers it necessary to develop a methodology other than the traditional positivist approach in sociology. A sociologist is confronted with the obdurate character of the social world. The social world can talk back; it is not just outside there but is in continuous motion, reacting to what the actor does. Like all actors, a sociologist also acts within that world and meets an eternally reacting social reality. How does he describe this social world?

> This world is the actual group life of human beings. It consists of what they experience and do, individually and collectively, as they engage in their respective forms of living, it covers the large complexes of interlaced activities that grow up as the actions of some spread out to affect the actions of others; and it embodies the large variety of relations between participants (Blumer, 1969: 35).

Obviously, it is not easy for a sociologist to grasp this social reality, for he often is not intimately acquainted with that social world (Shibutani, 1988: 28). Moreover, a sociologist often is influenced by stereotypes about unfamiliar social groups, and sociological theories guide his perception of the social world. Unlike Schütz, Blumer believes that an adapted methodology makes it possible to understand this obdurate social reality. Consequently, the methodology should not be confined to simple causal analysis in which the effect of variables on each other is studied but should also take into account the interpretative process of acting people. Causal analysis of variables where no interpretation is included might be helpful for the analysis of behaviour (Blumer, 1969: 139). But it has to be stressed that the most interesting part of social behaviour is always accompanied by interpretation. The task of the researcher is to grasp that interpretation, which he cannot do by simple variable analysis. Indeed, variable analysis does not capture the interpretation of social reality.

The main object for a researcher is to perceive the social reality in which the problems have to be detected. It is not the sociologist who has to hypothesize a problem, create it, and look later to see if he can find confirmation for his self-created problem. Schütz sees the sociologist more as the leading actor in the research act. In his opinion, it is the researcher who creates the homunculi and determines the standpoint from which he wants to approach social reality. Blumer, however, stresses the importance of social reality and the sociologist's duty to let social reality speak for itself.

How is this to be done? The guiding principles of the research act have to be found in the fundamental assumptions of symbolic interactionism. First, people are assumed to act according to the meanings of objects in a particular context. The researcher has to grasp these meanings, This can be done because he is able to take the role of the other, and participant observation, documentary analysis, etc. make this possible. The researcher has to approach the problem from the standpoint of the actors, not from his own standpoint. Here he has to apply the method of understanding, i.e., the researcher has to grasp immediately the definitions and interpretations of the acting individuals and groups within their context; he has to understand the meaning of objects and social interaction. Second, social behaviour is an ongoing process. Meanings change during social interaction, so research techniques have to be adapted to this process character. Static observations made at one point in time have to be abandoned. Questionnaires that obscure a clear picture of changing interpretations should not be used. Third, social actions are individual or collective processes in which the actor defines and interprets social reality, The researcher has to be aware not only of this process within society but also of his own interpreting behaviour. The method for capturing this process requires coming as close as possible to the changing interpretations of the actors. This means that researchers may not be determined by pre-given schemes of analysis like those provided in several sociological theories.

Theoretical concepts can be misleading. Fourth, collective phenomena, like institutions, organizations, social classes, and divisions of labour, must not be seen as entities in their own right. They have to be studied as interlinked behaviour, defined and interpreted by the participants of these entities. Indeed, joint action has to be interpreted in relation to the context in which it is realized (Blumer, 1969: 50-60).

Schütz did warn that it is almost impossible to establish close contact with the other. I am only directly aware of myself and can only reach the other by using ideal types. This is also the problem of the researcher. Blumer agrees but gives principles that are intended to provide a reliable understanding of social action. Two steps are necessary: exploration and inspection (Blumer, 1969: 40-47). Exploration fulfils two objectives: it brings the sociologist as close as possible to the social reality he wants to study and with which he is not familiar, and it allows him to adapt his research techniques to the actual nature of the problem. It creates the possibility of understanding the problem and of determining the data he has to collect. To achieve this, the researcher may use all kinds of ethically permissible techniques to approach social reality as close as possible, such as direct observation, interviewing, listening to conversations, document analysis, and group discussions. Exploration yields a description of the social reality as seen by the actors and is the first step toward answering theoretical questions. Unlike Schütz, who stresses several hindrances in the approach to the "Mitwelt", Blumer (1969: 179-181) believes that a systematic exploratory approach should provide reliable knowledge of social reality, although it is not easy.

The second step a sociologist has to make is inspection, i.e., "an intensive focused examination of the empirical content of whatever analytical elements are used for purposes of analysis, and this same kind of examination of the empirical nature of the relations between such elements" (Blumer, 1969: 43). Analytical elements are theoretical concepts like integration, social mobility, and morality, and the relations between these concepts. Inspection means that a researcher has to develop the ability to scrutinize meticulously the social reality that is covered by the analytical concepts and theoretical relations. The same techniques used in exploration can be applied. Again Blumer warns against a dogmatic use of research techniques determined by abstract logic. The main research principle is that techniques should be adapted to the research problem, not to an abstract research protocol. The researcher must allow the social reality to talk back. To do this, he cannot construct a research design that fits into the standardized research protocols of the positivist researcher.

To conclude this short review of the techniques for understanding social reality, I want to make two additional remarks. First, since the problem determines the research techniques, there is no definitive research protocol that might be chosen in advance. All techniques should be chosen in function of the nature of the problem to be studied. The guiding principle should be that the technique will allow me to reach the empirical world. The empirical world is the final test. Different techniques should be used to obtain the different interpretations of social reality and to find these interpretations of social reality none of the researcher's opinions may be taken for granted. They all have to be checked against the social reality. The researcher has to search not only for confirmation of his opinion, but also for falsification (Blumer, 1969: 29-30). To do this, he cannot rely on the classic method of variable analysis and hypothesis testing (Blumer, 1969: 171-182, 127-139) because this approach, inspired by the logic of a positivist research protocol, cannot capture the continuously changing social reality.

A second remark has to be made in relation to concepts, which have a very central function in research. For Schütz, they are ideal types constructed by the researcher in relation to the typifications the researcher experiences in meeting the "Umwelt". They are the clue to sociological knowledge. Blumer restricts this position somewhat (Morrione & Faberman, 1981a: 120). Typifications do not suffice for people to interact; people really have to come to a social interaction, not merely to typifications. Blumer warns against taking concepts for granted. Contrary to Schütz, Blumer proposes abandoning common-sense concepts for scientific concepts. Concepts in daily life help to perceive reality. The problem is that they direct perception in a particular way, a way determined by everyday experience.

Common-sense concepts do not imply meticulous analysis; they only refer to what is sensed. Scientific concepts fulfil similar functions as common-sense concepts, but they are questioned and their meaning changes in function of new experiences. Moreover, there is a tendency to consistency between these concepts (Blumer, 1969: 153-170). Although the origin of Blumer's scientific concepts is different from the origin of Schütz's, there are some similarities. Ideal types of the "Mitwelt" should also be adapted to those of the "Umwelt", and there should be a consistency between the different ideal types.

The main characteristics of scientific concepts are that they introduce a new orientation and experience, they make scientific research possible, and they permit deductive reasoning. This means that scientific concepts are the result of a meticulous scrutiny of social reality. For Blumer (1969: 147), a scientific concept is not a definitive concept that "refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects". Rather, he considers them "sensitizing concepts, which fit better in the ongoing social reality". Sensitizing concepts guide the researcher in his study of social reality. They can be "tested, improved and refined". It is the empirical test that validates them. It is not a definitive, theoretical construction that has to be broken down in variables and indicators. Social reality is the ultimate criterion of the validity of a sensitizing concept. It always has to refer to an understanding of social action, which does not necessarily imply sympathetic understanding, although it might help if this kind of understanding is possible (Verhoeven, 1980: 17).

This comparative analysis of Schütz's and Blumer's ideas does not imply that both solved all methodological problems. Indeed Hammersley contends in this same volume that Blumer did not clearly answer some methodological questions.

3. Conclusion

Understanding is a substantial part of both everyday life and social research. Neither Blumer nor Schütz doubt this. Nevertheless, they have different opinions about the foundations, the methods, and the level of understanding attained. The reason for these differences is situated in their respective basic assumptions about social reality and knowledge.

Schütz works in the phenomenological tradition, while Blumer takes a pragmatist standpoint. This means that Schütz brackets social reality and speaks about social reality as what is going on in our consciousness, as it appears to him. Blumer on the other hand considers social reality as something that is outside the individual. Blumer and Schütz both agree that people are intentionally directed toward that world, although they take a different standpoint vis-a-vis the knowing actor. Schütz speaks about the experienced social, pre-given, meaningful world within the consciousness of the actor; Blumer starts from the self-indicating individual who meets the other making meaningful indications shared by the others. Understanding is a process that takes into account the meaning present in all kinds of social behaviour. In spite of this reference to the social background of meaning, Schütz believes that understanding happens within a conscious actor. This actor has difficulty grasping the meaning as given by the others, and he only understands his own actions well. For Blumer, symbolic action is the action of an actor who is conscious of the outside world. This social world creates meaning, and the actor is able to grasp this meaning because he can take the role of the other. The process of understanding everyday life is, for Schütz, an activity of the actor inside his consciousness; for Blumer, it is an activity of a self-indicating individual in direct relation with the outer world. Complete understanding of everyday life is, for Schütz, very problematical because the actor can never make immediate contact with social life. For Blumer, although not without difficulties, this is less of a problem. Indeed, the actor can arrive at a lived experience with the other. Immediate confrontation with socially indicated meanings gives the actor a clear picture of what the other wants to show. The actor can always test his conception against what is going on in the outer world.

Not only are these characteristics of everyday life important for daily understanding of social reality, they also touch on the sociological understanding of social reality. In Schütz's opinion, a sociologist is confined by the problems that an actor meets in his understanding of social reality. Taking into account his position in the world, he only acquires limited knowledge of social reality. A sociologist only can reach the "Mitwelt". Even when he intends to grasp the meaning of the actors, he can only do so by relying on typifications, which are a reducing construct of the social world. Because this research act obliges the researcher to construct these types, there is always the chance that the researcher will create instead of detect social reality. Even when these types can be checked against types constructed by others, researchers or other actors, the influence of the researcher may be overwhelming.

Blumer, however, believes that a sociologist should never take for granted the meaning of social action as it appears to him. The final test of the understanding of social reality is finding it in the natural world, which is outside. To understand social reality, a researcher is not allowed to rely on pre-given schemes of understanding. Like the actor in everyday life, a researcher has to take the role of the other to falsify the patterns of understanding the sociologist habitually uses. To achieve this, he has to do two things: explore and inspect. Carefully doing these things and using different research techniques, the researcher may be able to expand the original, reduced picture of meaning. Blumer believes that this method allows the researcher to come very close to the understanding of social reality. Schütz, however, stresses the impediments a sociologist encounters in attaining this understanding: a sociologist has to live with the knowledge that there is a certain gap between his knowledge of the "Mitwelt" and the "Umwelt". For Schütz, concepts, as ideal types, help to span this gap to a certain extent. But Blumer warns against the risk of common-sense concepts and invites sociologists to use sensitizing concepts whose validity has to be tested by confrontation with social reality.

Both Schütz and Blumer argue very convincingly about the importance of the method of understanding for sociology, but neither paid much attention to the other's work. They developed their views from different methodological traditions and used different arguments for understanding in sociological research. Nevertheless, they both held that the sociological analysis of social reality needs the method of understanding.

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